Like Clockwork

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Like Clockwork

by DBMars

Summary

Will quits the FBI in the middle of the Chesapeake Ripper case, choosing instead to focus on his own happiness and mental health. He makes a living now selling vintage fishing gear, rare books, and refurbished antique clocks. He meets. Dr. Hannibal Lecter at an estate sale. They become friends, maybe more, but Will's headaches and hallucinations are getting worse...

Somewhere, a clock is ticking...

"The Hours of Folly..."

Chapter 1: "The Hours of Folly…"

"Damn it." Will squinted at the road, searching for his turnoff. The ad in the newspaper said the estate sale was on Cogs Drive, but he'd just passed Cogs Road. Is that what they'd meant? Worse, he was getting another headache. They'd been bad lately; he'd been working too hard and too often without his glasses. It was probably time for another trip to the optometrist to get his prescription adjusted.

Ah. Here was Cogs Drive. Could've chosen a more distinctive name. Will grumbled something like that under his breath, but there were more curse words intermingled. He eased the Volvo up the winding gravel drive and pulled in behind a black Bentley of all things. Cars lined the drive on either side leading up to the rambling white Cape Cod with peeling red shutters; a large sign had been posted in the tangled lawn that read ESTATE SALE - EVERYTHING MUST GO!

Will got out and approached the house, letting himself in without knocking. It was, in fact, full of strangers picking through a dead man's things. Will felt a twinge of guilt, a nerve-catch. He always did, going to sales like this, everyone circling the house like vultures over a carcass, picking it clean of everything of value until only the bones remained. And then those – the house, and it had good bones, Will could tell – would be sold off as well.

A woman in the kitchen was running the payment station. Will grimaced – he could tell just by looking that she was a relative of the deceased. Something about the curve of her mouth and the way she examined every little thing was being bought and sold. Like she was saying goodbye. Will avoided eye contact – it just made the empathy worse. His excess mirror neurons were a hot commodity when he was working homicide in New Orleans. Earned him a ticket to Quantico, even. But those days were over and Will wasn't sad to see them go. Well, mostly. It was hard to beat the thrill of outsmarting a murderer and getting justice for the victims. But in the end, it wasn't worth the toll on his mental state. And once he'd figured out how to monetize his hobbies, he didn't have to work for Jack Crawford anymore.

The house was absolutely full of… stuff. It was everywhere, lined up on tables and shelves, everything trailing a price tag. On the three-season porch, Will found several treasures – antique fishing lures and a fish basket that was probably circa 1935. Will cleaned, curated, and sold items like these online or at specialty auctions to collectors. He had a small but dedicated set of clients and he was always on the lookout for what he knew they'd like to add to their collections. Will also specialized in rare books, and he'd crafted a lucrative business refurbishing and selling antique clocks as well. Almost all of his transactions were online, which suited him just fine. He could communicate through writing, one of his strong suits, instead of face-to-face.

Speaking of, the ad had mentioned clocks specifically, so Will knew he had a few more rooms to search. The thrill of the hunt for rare clocks, parts, and bargains was overshadowed by the disconcerting sight of the old man's pill bottles still sitting by the side of the bed in the

master suite and a ‘90s-era Walkman on the arm of a well-loved recliner. Will picked it up. It had a price tag on it, too – and a Glenn Miller tape still in the deck. The foam-covered headphones smelled strongly like Head and Shoulders shampoo.

Will put it down and moved away quickly, trying not to let his neurons fire. He hadn’t found any clocks yet, but the upstairs guest bedroom had tables full of books, and some of them seemed old. A couple of hippie-looking women browsed, their flowered skirts flowing around their ankles, a sharp contrast to the man in the finely-tailored suit who was thumbing through a stack of vintage crime magazines on the other side of the room.

Will felt himself go into “search mode,” where his mind was attuned to minimize the amount of time it would take to go through the huge collection of books and maximize his chances of finding something he could make a profit with. He considered a couple of vintage Tom Swift novels, and then spotted a goldmine – a first edition copy of *Rockbound* by Frank Parker Day. The emerald cover was gorgeous; it was in remarkable condition. Will reached for it.

And so did someone else.

Will’s perception of time slowed, a clock slipping into entropy. The hand was fierce and elegant, the fingers limber and artistic. Veins and tendons rose against its surface, but brought the aesthetic pleasure of a topographical map, a birds-eye view of breathtaking terrain. The nails were rounded, buffed, the skin around them smooth and well-cared-for. The appendage looked capable of great violence and violent tenderness.

Will had time to stop, to avoid a collision. But he didn’t.

It was the man in the suit that had come up next to him, he realized, and their hands had just touched, brushing over the shamrock-hued cover of *Rockbound* .

They turned, a reflective reflex, and locked gazes, hands no longer touching, but still hovering over the book.

As much as Will wanted it – and knew how much it was worth – he was so startled by the man’s appearance that he let his hand fall to his side, acquiescing his claim on the incredible find. The stranger was so *distinctive-looking,* possessing a rare set of features that were undeniably compelling. Dark eyes, faint brows, brown hair streaked with ash, and a uniquely European line to his cheekbones that could only be eclipsed by the princely shape and hue of his lips. He looked like a painting of a conqueror, Regency royalty in a blue designer-brand suit with a champagne tie.

The man looked away after a significant moment and picked up the Day book. “A rare find,” he said, and Will’s nerves tingled at the sound of his voice, harmonious and foreign, three words so sleek and refined. “Have you read it?”

“Yeah,” Will said, immediately disliking the adversarial tone of his voice. “It’s, ah… a favorite, for sure.”

“Did you know that the shipwreck featured in the story was inspired by the real-life wreck of the *Sylvia Mosher* during the 1926 Atlantic hurricane season? It was a particularly deadly

year."

"Lost most of Miami that season, if I, uh, *recall* ." Will eyed the book, then looked back at the stranger. He chastised himself for not picking it up first. This man didn't look like he needed the money from the resale.

"I find the book an interesting artifact," the man continued, gently opening the front cover and looking over the publishing information. "The author spent a summer in Nova Scotia and then based the book on the residents of the small island he visited, many of whom freely told him their family stories. Later, they claimed he'd exploited them for money. It calls into question the author's positioning and his alleged cultural appropriation."

Will's annoyance melted back a bit. This guy knew his shit about Frank Parker Day, that was for sure. "Yeah, they, uh, the residents… they wrote a letter to the-the papers in Halifax and Lundenberg to, ah, accuse him of using them under false pretenses."

"It begs the question," the man added, eyes sparkling with a kind of info-dumping admiration, "how much of what Mr. Day wrote was accurate, and if the residents were upset because the truth was unflattering. Or is he guilty of reducing them to caricatures?"

"Little of both, probably," Will said.

The man's smile was almost adoring. He beamed it at Will for a drawn-out moment, then handed him the book. The price tag said five dollars. Will knew he could sell it for $300 or more. "Are, ah… you sure…?"

"I already have a first edition in slightly better condition," the man said. Will had an inkling – his neurons going off – that this was the owner of the Bentley.

Will nodded, turning the book over in his hands. "Uh, thanks. You… seen any clocks yet?"

"Not yet. But I haven't been through all the rooms. I believe there's a sunroom at the end of the hallway where more items are on display." He stepped out into the hallway, and Will followed. "I came because the advertisement mentioned timepieces – I'm in the market for a new mantle clock."

Will followed him into the sunroom, which was, as suspected, full of clocks – a couple of grandfathers, but the rest were mostly mantlepiece, which was also exactly what Will was looking for. He immediately went for the steeple-shaped 19th century mantle clock he saw sitting on a wicker table with several other more generic varieties. It looked small and dusty, unimpressive compared to some of the others, but Will knew this was an original Seth Thomas and once he had it cleaned up, he might get two hundred for it.

When he turned around, he saw the man in the suit hefting a timepiece, examining its condition. "That's a reproduction," he warned. "Feel how light it is? It's plywood, not oak."

The man's pale brows climbed a centimeter or two. "Well, you've averted a tragedy," he said, replacing it on the shelf where it had come from. "You must be an antiques dealer."

Will had never thought of himself that way, but wasn't that… sort of what he was now? "Just clocks," he said. "A-and books. And fishing stuff. Poles 'n… lures."

"Perhaps you can help me, then." The stranger gestured to the dead man's vast clock collection. "I'm looking to replace a 17th century French piece."

"Atmos or Torsion?"

The man didn't answer, just tilted his head a little to the side, which made a few strands of his hair move across his forehead. "You *are* an expert."

Will nodded, pressing his lips into a line, crossing his arms, the steeple clock held in the crook of one elbow. "You know which one. You were testing me. That whole time."

"And you've passed."

"And you're a good liar." Will said flatly. "You really have a first edition of *Rockbound* or was that, ah… bullshit, too?"

"It was the truth, not that you have any reason to believe me." The man looked down, jaw set, mouth and eyes contrite. "I hope you'll let me apologize. I've been misled before by so-called experts in the past. Plenty of dealers think if they read about antiques on the internet, they're sufficiently prepared to curate collections or offer advice."

"For most customers, they probably are," Will said. "But not you. No pulling… the *wool* over your eyes." He paused, letting the hippies in to look at the clocks. They glanced over the expensive timepieces and kept moving. "So, ah… why *are* you here, then?"

"I am looking for a replacement for my Atmos. It stopped working over a month ago. I've had two other alleged experts try to fix it, looked at it myself – I have a message in at the Smithsonian to see if they can recommend anyone, but haven't heard back. I saw the ad and thought I might find something for the meantime, or to replace it if the Atmos can't be repaired."

"I can take a look at it," Will offered before he'd quite thought it through all the way. "Ah, if you want. I mean, I'm not the Smithsonian, but…" he shrugged. "O-or you can let me clean this steeple clock up and I'll sell it to you. That Ansonia over there isn't bad either, depending on what you're looking for."

"All splendid ideas." The man picked up the Ansonia and tucked it under his arm. "I like to have options."

They went back downstairs and prepared to pay for their purchases. Will was glad he had someone with him during checkout. It made it easier, somehow, to face the woman selling the old man's things. Definitely her father, Will thought, based on her age and the pile of used kleenexes in the nearby trash basket. He avoided eye contact, fumbling through his pockets for his wallet.

The stranger in the suit deftly swept all of their purchases together on the table and withdrew an engraved money clip from his pocket, thick with cash. “What a wonderful collection,” he said pleasantly as the woman punched numbers into an adding machine with a sniffle. “It was such a pleasure to have the opportunity to see it.”

“Y-yeah? My dad, h-he-he just loved those clocks. Before he got sick, he was so careful about keeping them clean, and winding them. When I was a kid and had friends over, they’d all complain about the clocks chiming. It got so I didn’t even hear it, y’know, I was so used to it. But then when I’d have a sleepover at a girlfriend’s I could never sleep. Because there were no chimes and no ticking.” The more the woman spoke, antithetically, the more in control of her emotions she seemed. “Oh, and this book – he just loved old books. I don’t know if he ever read them, but he just loved the covers, and the smell. He’d always talk about how a man’s study should smell like old books.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” the stranger in the suit said gently, thumbing cash out of his clip. “My friend here is a clock expert, and he’s going to give these pieces the same care and attention your father did. And this is one of his favorite novels, so to have a first edition is a special gift indeed. Think of all the people here today that will leave with something they can treasure and enjoy.” He nodded towards a mother who just entered the room with a little girl, seven or eight years old, who was holding the Walkman, the headphones over her ears, bopping and swaying to Glenn Miller with a glowing smile on her face.

“That’s why I wanted to do this instead of just auctioning the house with everything in it,” the woman said as she loaded the book and the antique lures into the fishing basket, handing it to Will without looking at him. The stranger helped her wrap the clocks in newspaper and lower them carefully into boxes.

“This really is the most therapeutic thing you can do for yourself,” the stranger promised. “I know it isn’t easy, but this way you can say goodbye to him one item at a time.”

“You’re right, you’re so right.” The woman wiped her eyes, but she was smiling. “Let me see… I owe you seventeen-fifty back–”

The stranger held up a hand for her to keep the change. The woman was suddenly out of her chair, and opening her arms. The man in the suit hugged her. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you, guys, I really appreciate it, and I know Dad would’ve too. You guys have a great day, okay? You take care, now.”

Will followed the stranger outside, holding the fishing basket and one of the boxes. He had a weird feeling in his chest he couldn’t explain. It was wrapped up in the empathy he felt for the woman and the strange sensation that the entire display had been another act in a play. And he was the audience. Or maybe he was being a paranoid asshole, and this guy really did just want to ease the woman’s suffering.

“You’re a therapist,” he blurted, hustling to catch up to the man’s long strides. Sure enough, they were headed for the Bentley.

“I am. A psychiatrist, actually. Where are you parked?”

“Silver Volvo.”

The stranger helped him load the items into the back and secure them so they were in no danger of being damaged during the drive. “You could’ve billed her for a full session,” Will said, closing the back hatch. “That was… a lot.”

“She seemed to have a small breakthrough,” the stranger said, looking a little more smug than Will would have liked. “Are you familiar with therapy yourself?”

“Familiar? Yeah. Had plenty of it. Doesn’t work on me.”

Again, that damned look of amused surprise, like somebody watching a puppy do something new. “Perhaps you’ve been seeing the wrong therapists.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Will growled. “And don’t psychoanalyze me. You wouldn’t like me when I’m… psychoanalyzed.”

“You’re not my client. But I am yours.” The man handed him a business card. It was fancy, embossed, edged with gold. The calligraphy read DR. HANNIBAL LECTER and provided an office address and phone number. “Please let me know when you’ve finished refurbishing the clocks. I’ll have you look at my Atmos. If it can’t be repaired, we can see how the others look on my mantle.”

Will was torn between wanting to tell this Dr. Lecter to fuck off, being completely intrigued by him, and knowing he was a lucrative client. These things waged war in him, fluttering through his guts like birds attacking one another in the sky, wheeling and diving, clawing and pecking, beating their wings of war. “Will do,” was all he could manage to say, and fled to the driver’s seat of the Volvo. Pulling away, he could see Dr. Lecter watching him go until he disappeared around the bend in the gravel drive.

Every Second Dripping Off My Fingertips

Chapter Summary

Will is haunted by the ghost of the old clock-collector.

Chapter 2: Every Second Dripping Off My Fingertips

Will spent hours and hours on the two clocks for Dr. Lecter. He was putting in way too much work, and he knew it. There were things he would have ignored for other clients, little cosmetic details or bits that might break in the future. But “good enough" to sell on the internet was, for some reason, not good enough for Dr. Lecter, at least in Will’s mind. Will told himself it was because this was a face-to-face client. But the more he thought about it, the more he had to admit that his pride was at stake. He’d passed Dr. Lecter’s sneaky little bullshit “test” but he knew the evaluation wouldn’t end there. And he wanted to prove himself. And so he did as Dr. Lecter had promised the woman with the dead father. He treated the clocks with care, love, and attention to every detail.

It took him even longer because the headaches were getting worse. It felt like he was popping Aspirin like breath mints. He made an appointment with his optometrist for the next week and did his best to wear his glasses and use the magnifying glass he also utilized when crafting his own fly fishing lures.

One night, he finally forced himself to put down his tools and go to bed. He’d thought maybe today was the day he was going to finish the steeple clock, but he had to give it up and rest his eyes. Squinting, half-nauseated from the pain, he whistled for his dogs and took them outside into the summer evening. Winston pawed his leg as if he knew something was wrong. Will bent down to pet him and let him lick his stubbled cheek. “I’m okay, I’m okay,” he said, shivering despite the fact that it’d been in the 80s all day and the evening still held on to the moist heat of July.

As he waited for the dogs to run out their wiggles and do their business, Will noticed some movement in the treeline. He rubbed his eyes and face, trying to focus his distance vision. It looked like a person. An old man in a cardigan sweater. Will had never seen him before, and he looked so frail – what was he doing hiking around the woods? It was getting dark.

Will heard Buster yip and was just about to tell him, and the rest of the dogs, to come, afraid they might run over and greet the man, overwhelming him with seven dogs wanting pets and scritches. But he realized the reason Buster had cried was because Max had nipped his back leg and stolen the stick he’d been playing with.

None of the dogs acknowledged the old man. They scampered about, oblivious, it seemed, to the stranger on the edge of their territory.

Now the old man was standing directly across the field from Will, still as a statue, looking his way. Staring at him, a kindly smile on his face. Despite the expression, it was still unnerving. He just kept looking and looking.

Will raised a hand and waved.

The old man pulled a green book from behind his back, and opened it. *Rockbound.* Lifting it to his face, he pressed his nose in and smelled it, closing his eyes in enjoyment.

“What the fuck?” Will hissed under his breath.

Winston pawed at his leg frantically. Will looked down at him for a moment, and then back up at the man.

Except the old-timer was gone. Vanished.

A ghost.

“Okay, let’s go!” He called the dogs back in and sent them to bed. Will considered locking all the doors and windows, but what help was that against a ghost? Had he literally just seen a fucking *ghost* ? Fuck, his head was *pounding* .

Will then took his temperature. 102.6. No wonder he felt shitty. He took some more medicine and collapsed into bed. It’d just been a hallucination. His imago of what the old man with the clock collection had looked like.

He fell into a fitful sleep. Sometime in the night, he smelled Head and Shoulders and old books. Heard a voice whisper, “ *You do beautiful work, son. Those clocks never looked so good. Can’t wait to hear them chime again* .”

“The Spirit is that Domain of Our Awareness Where There is No Time”

Chapter Summary

Will visits Dr. Lecter and is invited to stay for dinner.

Chapter 3: “The Spirit is that Domain of Our Awareness Where There is No Time”

Will realized upon climbing the steps to Dr. Lecter’s house that he had no way of knocking on the door since he had a clock under each arm. Luckily, the door swung in as he approached. Dr. Lecter was there, looking much more casual than when Will had seen him at the estate sale, trading the three-piece for a white dress shirt and charcoal slacks, his sleeves rolled up. Despite this, he was most definitely groomed, and his rich and complicated cologne tickled Will’s nose immediately.

“Will,” Dr. Lecter greeted with a smile of welcome. “Let me help you.”

Will handed him the steeple clock and came inside what he thought probably qualified as a mansion. The foyer was dark and richly furnished with a blue floral Oriental rug and 17th century oil paintings on the walls in gilded frames. The landscapes were definitely not prints, and Will had seen similar pieces go at auction for ten grand.

Dr. Lecter led him to the living room, which was also… uniquely decorated, to say the least. Animal skulls, the taxidermied head of an antelope, juxtaposed with more 17th century furnishings and green damask wallpaper. Dr. Lecter had removed his Atmos from the mantle and placed it on the coffee table. He slid the steeple clock onto the mantle instead, and invited Will to put the other clock next to it to consider the aesthetics.

“You’ve done wonders with these two,” Dr. Lecter complimented after they ran through the usual small talk pleasantries about the hot weather and how Will’s drive up from Wolf Trap had been. Will could smell something cooking back in the kitchen that made his stomach growl. Whatever Dr. Lecter was having for dinner was probably better than what he was gonna have, which was Burger King on the way home.

“Thanks.” Will let himself feel pride at the remark. He sat on the couch and gently opened the back of the Atmos. Nothing jumped out at him as being wrong with it, but Dr. Lecter was right – it wasn’t running. He squinted, putting on his glasses, tipping it towards the light of the window, then closed the back with a sigh. “I’ll have to take this back to the shop.”

“Of course. In the meantime, I’ll see which of these I’m most attached to, should you be unable to revive my original piece.”

“Okay, I’ll let you know.” Will closed the back of the clock and stood up. “If I need any parts or anything it might be two or three weeks.”

Dr. Lecter nodded, then looked back at the clocks on his mantle, finger on his chin, as if evaluating them.

Will turned to see himself out, taking the doctor’s silence for the end of the conversation. Then, “Leaving so soon?”

Will turned to see Dr. Lecter waiting for his response, hands casually in his pockets. “I thought, uh…” Will wasn’t sure how to end that sentence and several strings of words scrolled through his mind like the tumblers of a slot machine.

“Tonight’s main course is boeuf bourguignon. Every time I make it I seem to forget just how much the recipe yields. If you don’t help me, Will, I’ll be eating it for a week.”

So he did live alone. Will was surprised. Yeah, no wedding ring, but no kids from a previous marriage, a fiancée or a live-in… somebody?

“Please don’t tell me you’re a vegetarian.” Dr. Lecter looked deadly serious for a moment before letting a playful smile slip.

“N-no, I’m not.”

“It’s over an hour here from Wolf Trap. Seems a shame for you to come all this way and stay less than twenty minutes.”

Will considered. “It… smells delicious,” he admitted.

“Come.” Dr. Lecter motioned for him to follow and disappeared through a nearby doorway. Will set down the broken clock and followed, finding himself in a cobalt blue dining room, one wall lined with herbs growing from planters attached to the walls, fed by grow lights. The table was already set for two, fine china. Vintage, from Tiffanys no less. Will had seen an identical set go at an auction for over $16,000. Jesus Christ, he better not drop anything or cut a piece of beef too hard.

“Please.” Dr. Lecter pulled out his chair for him. Will had only done that once, and it was for his much-suffering prom date, Trisha Anderson, who only went with him because her mom was sleeping with Will’s dad (to call the interactions “dating” was generous) when they lived in Grand Haven. Needless to say, no one had ever done it *for* him. He sat awkwardly and let Dr. Lecter help push his chair in.

There were candles lit. Will felt destabilized, out of place. Dr. Lecter seemed to sense it and gave him a reassuring smile before disappearing into the kitchen.

There was wine. There were *courses*. The golden pendulum swung in Will’s mind as Dr. Lecter served the salad. Picking up his fork, he said, “You *confuse* me.”

The forkful of lettuce or whatever the hell kind of greenery it was paused on its way to Dr. Lecter’s mouth before resuming its course. “In what way?” he asked after swallowing.

“You knew this would be… unorthodox. Over the top. That it’d make me uncomfortable. And yet… you did it *anyway* . Why?” Will chased some greenery onto his fork and stuffed it in his mouth so he wouldn’t have to talk for a minute. Shit, that was a delicious vinaigrette.

“I was curious what would happen,” was the only response provided.

“Another test? Wanted to, ah… see if I knew which *fork* to use?” Will wiggled the salad fork between his thumb and forefinger.

“I wanted company for dinner.” Again, he made it seem so simple. “And this is how I serve dinner. I was also curious how you would react.” Dr. Lecter took another bite of salad, so Will did too, finding a perfectly crisp-tender piece of white asparagus to munch. “There’s much to learn about a person by how he sets his table, what he serves and to whom. I thought I would show you myself and gauge your reaction.”

“You are what you eat,” Will said.

“Precisely.” Hannibal’s smile curled up one side of his proud, distinctive mouth. “I’m very careful with what I put into my body.” That self-satisfied look seemed to say, *and look at me — can you argue with the results?*

“You eat like this every night?” Will asked incredulously. He knew how to cook the basics and fed himself nutritiously and well when he was home, but when he went on buying trips he found himself at burger joints more often than not. Last night his headache had been so bad all he could manage to do was cook some eggs and go to bed.

“When time allows. Existence is finite, Will. Our clocks are designed to be wound once and once only. Then we stop ticking. The rest is silence.”

“Life’s too short not to use the fancy plates,” Will said. He found himself smiling in spite of himself.

“Exactly.”

Will picked up his fork again and finished his salad.

And with that, they were talking and eating and, God forbid, becoming friendly. Dr. Lecter told him about moving to America to attend Johns Hopkins, taking and leaving his position as a trauma surgeon, and going back to school for psychiatry. Mostly, though, they talked about Will, especially once Dr. Lecter found out about Will’s stint with the FBI. “Why did you leave this line of work? It seems like you were well-suited for it, if you can indeed profile killers in the ways you describe.”

“It was just… it was too much, after a while. I started… having bad dreams. Days when… I couldn’t turn it off. The profiling, th-the… ability to get into a killer’s mindset, it was – I couldn’t control it. I felt *crazy* . The only thing that helped was working on clocks o-or cataloging lures… If things got really bad I’d just sit for *hours* and inventory antique fishing gear or fix up clocks.” Will pulled a piece of bread from the fresh-baked baguette they shared and used it to mop up some bourguignon sauce, shaking his head. “When I realized I could

make a damn decent living doing something that… gave me *peace* like that… I just… walked away. Right in the middle of one of the biggest cases the FBI's ever tackled." He scoffed quietly before taking a sip of wine. It sounded bitter in his ears and tasted that way in his mouth as well. "The people I used to work with, they don't even… *speak* to me anymore."

"Because you left?" Hannibal placed a piece of beef delicately in his mouth, closing his lips around the tines of the fork.

"Because I left. I chose m-my life over… murder victims yet to come." Will set his fork back onto his plate, suddenly overwhelmed. He moistened his bottom lip, looking at the remaining food and not at his companion.

"What you did was very brave, Will," Dr. Lecter said. Even though the memory of how he'd comforted a complete stranger was fresh in Will's mind, he had to admit these words felt good. "As I said, the clock only ticks for so long. There has to be some room for joy." He gestured to the elaborate table in front of them. "Your former friends could make the same judgment of me. I left my work in the emergency room for similar reasons. I was tired of losing patients, as infrequently as that happened. But how many more lives could I have saved? Arguably, hundreds. And yet, I walked away."

"Yeah, but now you help people," Will argued. "I… sell old fishing lures and clocks to people with too much money." He pressed his lips together to keep them shut. Goddamn, that had sounded pretty fucking rude.

"Life's too short for a cheap mantelpiece clock," Dr. Lecter assured him, getting to his feet and collecting Will's plate. "And it's far too short to skip dessert."

Will chuckled. "Okay, let me just text my neighbor quick so she can let my dogs out."

Dessert was chocolate mousse, which certainly tasted of life's-too-short decadence. "If you don't mind me asking," Dr. Lecter inquired even as Will closed his eyes and made a small sound of delight as the dessert hit his tongue. "What case was it that you left unfinished with the FBI?"

"T-the Chesapeake Ripper," Will told him.

"He hasn't been caught? Wasn't it almost two years ago that he was on the news?"

"Yeah, he had, uh, a *sounder* of three victims back in late fall 2011," Will confirmed.

"A sounder?"

"He thinks of them as pigs," Will explained. "So that's what I started calling them, these groups of three. The victims, I mean. They're swine to him."

"Forgive my interest," Dr. Lecter said, finishing his mousse. "But I'm very curious about your profile from a professional standpoint. I've dabbled a bit in criminal psychology myself."

Will found himself spilling his guts, even though the Ripper murders were part of an ongoing investigation, and he definitely shouldn't be sharing details like this with a civilian. But Dr. Lecter seemed so wholly interested in what Will was saying, so impressed by his insights. Will felt like the only other person in the world. Treasured.

"Intelligent sociopath is just… not nuanced enough to really describe him," Will continued as they sat in front of empty dessert dishes, lingering over the last glass of wine. "There's something so… brilliantly *alien* about the way he thinks. L-like he came here from another planet and he's trying to understand what humanity *is* . He studies our ways, our culture, our customs, our music and art and he *loves* it. It affects him, see – that's what makes him more than a run-of-the-mill sociopath. I bet he cries at sad songs even when nobody's watching and he doesn't have to perform. He can *feel* , and he does, deeply, but he knows he's not one of us. Doesn't have any more empathy for a person than somebody would for the steak on their plate. He can blend in perfectly, but it's… *playing* a part. He's not from this world, and maybe that's just fine. Beneath his person suit, he's something so entirely different. I just, ah…" He stopped himself, taking a drink of wine. "Sorry, that all probably sounded… creepy o-or off-putting."

"Not at all. It's fascinating. Please, continue." Dr. Lecter was leaning closer now, his eyes shining in the light from the diminishing candles.

"I just have to think… how *lonesome* he must be. Sort of like, ah… Superman. Came to Earth alone, family dead, last of his kind. He steps out of the-the crashed spaceship and thinks, *what is this place? Who are these people? They're nothing like me and they die so easily.* "

"Perhaps he needs to find a Lois Lane," Dr. Lecter suggested, tracing his fingers up and down the stem of his wine glass.

"Not another human, no. He needs someone like *him* ."

For a moment, a deep sadness flickered across Dr. Lecter's features. "But he's the last of his kind."

"Nothing's impossible," Will replied. "I mean, in the comics, they brought all kinds of Kryptonians into the story. Even a dog."

"If a suitable companion can't be found, perhaps one could be made."

Will half-smiled. "Yeah, get Lex Luthor on that," he joked gently. "More like Dr. Frankenstein. Make the Ripper a bride."

"To appease him? Make him stop killing?"

"Oh, he'll never stop killing," Will assured him before draining his own glass. "He just doesn't want to be lonely anymore."

"I'm sure he doesn't," Dr. Lecter murmured dreamily, the candle flames dancing in his soft, dark eyes.

Will reluctantly prepared to leave after the dishes were done. Before he could go, Dr. Lecter handed Will his phone and asked him to program it with Will's cell number. "I'd like to call you in a week or so to check on your progress with the Atmos."

Will did as he was asked. It wasn't until he'd said thank you and goodbye and was on his way home when he realized he'd just given someone his number for the first time since college.

"You Shall Not Advance the Hour"

Chapter Summary

"He cries at sad songs," the ghost whispered.

Chapter 4: “You Shall Not Advance The Hour”

Dr. Lecter called, as promised. Will hadn’t made much progress on the clock. It was a complex repair, and he had ordered a series of parts to try to see if they’d solve the issue or not. He wouldn’t know until he tried. Despite this, Dr. Lecter invited him back to Baltimore for dinner again. And Will went. Dr. Lecter served rabbit and carrot cake and dinner went even later than it had the previous time.

Only three days passed and there was another call – did Will want to go to another estate sale and look for books and lures and clocks? Yes, he did. And lunch after, a picnic on the way back into the city? Why not? Dr. Lecter wanted to see where Will worked, to see his admittedly scant progress on the Atmos. Will prepared by deep-cleaning his house, emptying the vacuum bag full of dog hair twice before Dr. Lecter was slated to arrive with homemade sausages for man and dog alike.

They got together for coffee or a drink or two, and met to walk through a sidewalk chalk art show and an outdoor screening of *Amélie* . Will was surprised and affected when his companion let a few tears fall during the climax of the film; Hannibal was confident enough in his masculinity, it seemed, that he didn’t even bother wiping them away.

They could – and did – talk for hours, and Will came to realize how much he cherished that feeling that Dr. Lecter gave him: that they were the only two people in the world. Will had very little experience texting in a social sphere – before, he’d mostly used messaging for work, Jack Crawford texting him the locations of crime scenes. But one afternoon, Dr. Lecter had sent him a picture of his own copy of *Rockbound* with the message, *for your peace of mind.*

Will had texted back, *oh good, I was still losing sleep over that.*

And that was how it started. Now they messaged several times a day.

Was this normal? Was this something… friends did? Will realized he didn’t have any fucking clue. But it was nice, waking up to a message or having one ping through in the evening. It was intoxicating, really, knowing that someone was actively thinking about him throughout the day. And the dogs. Hannibal knew all their names and seemed to enjoy the pictures Will sent.

In fact, Will had to admit that this was the happiest he'd been in a long time. He just didn't know how to put it into words.

The only thing interfering with this budding… whatever it was, were Will's headaches and fevers. He'd had to decline a couple of invitations because of them. And they were starting to disrupt his work. He'd missed one of the biggest clock auctions of the year down in Savannah, stuck at home in bed.

And the ghost of the old man had appeared again. Three times now. One time it'd been right at the treeline, where Will had seen him, which was disconcerting enough. Seeing him in the bathroom mirror behind Will's shoulder when he'd stood up from spitting into the sink, that was fucking eerie. But the penultimate instance was when Will woke up to find the old man leaning over him in his bed. " *He cries at sad songs* ," the ghost whispered in a gravelly, far-away voice. " *Tears up at the movies. Last of his kind.* "

Will rolled over on his other side, pulling a sweat-soaked pillow over his head. When he looked back, the ghost was gone and all the dogs were sound asleep. They woke, however, when he got up and turned the lights on, loading the 20 gauge he used to hunt ducks, and checked every room, cranny, and closet in the house. This, admittedly, didn't take long. He thought about doing a loop of his property but decided against it.

Cracking the gun at the breech, he removed the shells and put them back in the box, locked the drawer he kept ammo in, and replaced the shotgun on the rack. He let the dogs out for a brief respite, then ordered them and himself back to bed, leaving the light over his workbench on to fight the shadows.

Don't, he thought. *It's two in the morning. You're being a child.*

When you were working cases, sometimes you had nightmares. It was just a dream.

These headaches – maybe you have a tumor.

Will gave up the fight and rolled over to get his phone from the bedside table. He opened up his text thread with Dr. Lecter and typed a message.

Do you believe in ghosts?

Then, *I'm sorry. It's late. I'm just trying to rationalize something I saw.*

To his surprise, three little dots appeared. Dr. Lecter was responding.

What did you see, Will?

I saw the old man we bought the clocks from. Maybe. Who knows what he looked like.

There were photographs in the house. You must have subconsciously absorbed his appearance when we visited. May I call you?

I can't talk. I'm trying to get the dogs settled down.

Did they react to this apparition?

No. They never noticed any of the times I've seen it.

You've seen it multiple times?

Will nodded, even though Dr. Lecter couldn't see him do so. *That's what makes me think it isn't a dream. I saw him twice in the fields outside when I was awake and the dogs didn't notice. Once in the house, in a mirror.*

There are several possibilities. Some of them medical, others spiritual.

Do you believe in ghosts?

I've never seen a ghost, but I've felt haunted.

What did you do about it?

Nothing. It still happens from time to time. Something I've learned to live with. When I feel its presence, I often compose music as a means of distraction, channeling my feelings into creative pursuits.

What, so I should go grab my grade school recorder, play a few rounds of "Hot Cross Buns"?

I'm laughing at your response, because I assume you are joking.

Will chuckled too, especially at how Dr. Lecter chose to designate LOL. *I am. Unless you think it'll help.*

I think what will help is if you and I speak more about it in person. There is a coffee shop in Laurel that's a 30 minute drive for each of us.

Don't you have appointments today?

The morning is easier to reschedule than the afternoon – shall we say 8:00?

I'm okay, really.

See you then, Will.

He sighed. But smiled. *Okay, see you then. If I get there before you, do you want a cappuccino?*

Yes. And if I arrive first, black coffee with two regular sugars. No Sweet n' Low, agave syrup, Splenda, or any other such nonsense. Turbinado sugar if it's available. Not a question. He knew Will's order. They knew each other's orders. Dr. Lecter texted Will the coffee shop's information. It was called the Love Life Cafe.

Will managed to get a little more sleep, then showered and dressed and headed out. He told Dr. Lecter everything over a couple rounds of coffees and some pastries. The doctor agreed with Will that it could be stress, fever hallucinations, something neurological, something leftover from his days working for the FBI, or… something unearthly. They simply didn't have enough information.

"What should I do?" Will asked him. "I mean, honestly, what would you do if you were me?"

"I would wait," Dr. Lecter told him. "And I would begin careful documentation of the sightings to see if a pattern is established. Then, I'd use that data to make a decision. But since you've been experiencing headaches and fevers, you should document those as well and see if they're correlated. I'd be more than happy to go over the data with you. And," he added, "be sure to keep that appointment with your optometrist."

"I will," Will promised. On the way home he stopped at a Walgreens and bought a little pocket-sized notebook to record everything Dr. Lecter had suggested, promising to call if he saw the ghost again.

"Your Watches Are Behind the Times"

Chapter Summary

Will loses time and ends up back at the old man's house again.

Chapter 5: “Your Watches Are Behind the Times”

Will woke up sweaty and disoriented, mouth dry, head screaming in pain as his pulse pounded through it. The light bit into his eyes and he covered his face, rubbing it vigorously for half a minute before daring to peek through his fingers again.

He was behind the wheel of the Volvo. The engine was off, but the headlights were still on, illuminating the house at the end of the gravel drive. It was the white Cape Cod with the red shutters surrounded by untamed trees and long, unkempt grasses. The old man’s house.

The car’s clock said it was 3:30 am. The last thing Will remembered was cooking the dogs some fresh meat and rice with herbs (a recipe Dr. Lecter had suggested) and feeding them, letting them out again… and he’d seen the old man’s ghost at the treeline again, holding the steeple clock, rocking it in his arms like a baby, singing to it. But it wasn’t a lullaby. He was singing the unmistakable chimes of the Westminster melody.

And now Will was here. Hours passed in a blink. Breathing heavily, panic rising, he groped around in his pockets. No phone. He was still wearing his clothes from earlier in the day and he had his wallet in his pocket at the very least. “Fuck,” he muttered. How long had he been sitting here? In a sudden burst of anxiety, he started the car, just to make sure the battery wasn’t dead. A cascade of relief washed over him as the engine roared to life.

He put the car in reverse, then back in park. Reaching out, Will turned the car off and got out after retrieving a flashlight from his glove compartment.

The house had a FOR SALE BY OWNER sign in the front. Otherwise, the place was dark and silent. Will went around back and slid a credit card into the flimsy kitchen door, popping it open with ease. And then he was inside, creeping through the blackened rooms. Whatever items hadn’t sold at the auction were still in their places, price tags fluttering in the wind created by his body as he passed.

He paused in the living room, listening. The only discernible sound was the far-off whisper of cars on the highway. Still, he crept along as if someone might appear at any moment, clearing rooms with a police officer’s instinct though he was armed only with a flashlight.

He found the sunroom with the remaining clock collection. Many of the timepieces had sold, it seemed, except for the ones in rough shape or reproductions that weren’t worth much. Will

shone the flashlight from clock-face to clock-face, illuminating them one at a time, the light lingering on their ivory surfaces, showing their hands frozen at the moment when they ran out of winding, ceased to tick without their master's loving hands.

But the next round white thing he settled the light on *wasn't* a clock face.

It was a *human* face, peering between a wicker chair and a couch as if the person was crouched down behind them. The old man's face, grinning at him with yellowed teeth. Will emitted a breathless gasp-shriek and stumbled back, the flashlight tumbling from his shaking hand and thudding to the carpet. He bent and scrabbled around for it, lifting it back to the black crevice between the pieces of furniture.

There was nothing there. Darkness, and the sound of Will's ragged breathing.

A clock chimed.

"Fuck this," Will hissed, backing away from the doorway. "L-listen!" he raised his voice to a shout. "I don't know what-what you want! Do you want your clocks back, your book? You're dead, okay, but you can have them if you l-leave me the fuck *alone* !"

Silence.

Will turned and fled, getting in his car and driving home as fast as he dared.

"Quiet Minds Cannot Be Perplexed"

Chapter Summary

> Will is found wandering the roads at night. The only person he can call for help is Hannibal.

Chapter 6: “Quiet Minds Cannot Be Perplexed”

Will was afraid to tell Dr. Lecter. If he told someone else, it made it real. Not that it wasn’t tempting to unload all of his burdens on his friend. His *only* friend, Will realized. How long until Dr. Lecter dropped him because being his friend was too much like spending a day at the office of his psychiatry practice? The thought made panic rise in his throat, splitting across his mouth like a metal bit attached to a bridle.

He tried to work on the clock. He kept his optometrist appointment. His prescription only changed slightly, but based on Will’s difficulties working and his headaches, the doctor ordered him new glasses that would be ready in a week or so.

The dogs liked that he was home so much. Will hated being stuck in bed when the fevers came. Luckily, he had someone to talk to on the phone or send a message here and there when his eyes would adjust.

Saturday night. Will had hauled up the old TV from the basement that’d been left in the house when he bought it. There was no remote, but considering he was using rabbit ears, there weren’t a lot of channels to choose from. He kept it on Virginia Public Television just to have some noise in the background. Later in the evening, he switched to a local public access channel and watched weird old movies that were outside of copyright, just like he used to do when he was a kid staying up past his bedtime. Tonight, to his delight, it was *Carnival of Souls,* followed by *Night of the Living Dead* and then *Atom Age of the Vampire.*

Weird to have a movie about being dead and not realizing it as a comfort film, but *Carnival of Souls* had always been his favorite growing up. Just the right amount of scary to safely experience existential anxiety. And the haunting beauty of the organ music and old pavilion scenes were somehow soothing.

Until he saw the old man’s ghost among the ghouls on the screen, smeared in greasepaint, eyes rimmed with kohl, dancing with the film’s heroine, spinning her faster and faster to the chaotic organ music and suddenly Will felt like *he* was spinning, could sense the old man’s gnarled hands in his own, could smell his shampoo and throat lozenges, the organ giving way to “In the Mood.”

The flashing black and white TV screen slowly morphed into overlapping shades of red and blue. Will's vision cleared in agonizingly slow increments. He raised his hand to block the lights that dug into his eyes.

"Sir? Sir? Do you know where you are?"

The words came to him as though someone was calling out to him underwater. Like bubbles, the words rose and eventually breached the surface, bursting into his ears.

"Sir? Do you have an ID on you?"

Will blinked and lowered his hand. His vision cleared, the shadows evaporating. He shivered, a sudden full-body quake. A sheriff's deputy stood in front of him, shining a flashlight at his chest, a lighted cruiser parked behind him. Will looked around at the darkened fields on either side of the road. Touching his chest, he found himself wearing his tee shirt and boxers, soaked with cold sweat, barefoot against the asphalt.

A whine at his knee. Winston was at his side, looking up at him with worried eyes for a moment before pawing at his leg.

"Is that your dog?"

"Y-yeah. This is Winston." Will's words were syrupy and slow.

"You been drinking tonight, sir?"

"No, I'm – I have a fever. I'm sick," Will explained. "I must've wandered out of my house…"

"Did you take any over-the-counter medicines? Or any other substances?"

Will shook his head. "J-just some aspirin."

The deputy approached slowly. Will knew the drill. He held up his hands at shoulder height and let the deputy pat him down. Then the officer put the back of his dark hand on Will's forehead. "Yeah, you're burning up," he confirmed. "Better get you home. Is there someone I can call? Someone who might be out looking for you?"

"N-no," Will said as the deputy opened up the trunk and pulled out a blanket, handing it to him. "I live alone."

The deputy frowned. "Then I should take you to the ER. Otherwise there's nothing to stop you from wandering out again."

"T-there *is* someone," Will said as he wrapped the blanket around himself and slid into the back of the cruiser. Winston hopped up and curled up next to him, head on Will's lap. The deputy got behind the wheel and pulled out his phone. Will recited Hannibal Lecter's number.

The deputy stayed out front in his cruiser until Dr. Lecter arrived in just under an hour from the original call. To do so, he must have been driving like a bat out of hell, despite the traffic cameras that had probably caught him several times, issuing automatic tickets. Will's first instinct was to want to scold his friend for racking up tickets just to come to Will's aid (and risking an accident) but when he saw Dr. Lecter get out of the Bentley and bend over to speak to the deputy through his cruiser window, he felt something very warm and very secure snuggle into his chest, draped around his heart like a fox curling its tail over its nose in the winter.

He called the dogs back when Hannibal let himself inside, ordering them to their beds. All of them were wagging their tails even as they obeyed; they associated Dr. Lecter with homemade dog treats.

"Don't get up," Dr. Lecter ordered Will with a clinician's firmness as he tried to get out of bed. Will lowered himself back down with a half-inaudible grumble. Dr. Lecter set down a black doctor's bag and slipped off his jacket, revealing an outfit more casual than Will had ever seen him in; a dark blue linen shirt and khaki pants. Dr. Lecter rolled up his sleeves and wheeled over the chair from Will's workbench, settling onto it and opening his bag for a stethoscope and thermometer.

"Open up, please." Dr. Lecter shined a small penlight down Will's throat, then up his nose and into his eyes, first one, then the other, checking to see how and if the pupils reacted. Then he stuck the thermometer under Will's tongue and placed the ends of the stethoscope in his ears. "Breathe normally," he said, then asked Will to take deeper breaths. When he slid the stethoscope onto Will's back, he snuck it beneath Will's shirt, the bare heel of his hand skimming over Will's skin. His other palm spread over Will's chest between his pectorals as if holding him steady.

Will's reaction to this treatment was powerful and unexpected. He felt heat flushing over him where before he'd been wracked with chills from the fever. The touch felt healing, as if Dr. Lecter conjured some kind of magic. All at once he was so tired he felt like he could fall asleep at any second, anxieties calmed, tortured body at rest.

Dr. Lecter took the thermometer from Will's mouth. "One hundred and four. Do you remember anything about how you came to be on the road?"

Will shook his head. He wasn't sweating anymore; his skin felt tight and dry on his face. "I… wasn't feeling good after dinner. Barely ate, ah… took care of the dogs and then I was watching TV." he nodded to the old set that was now displaying black and white static. Dr. Lecter reached over and switched it off. "I just wanted to hear something in the background, uh, and then *Carnival of Souls* was on and… the next thing I knew the-the deputy was shining a flashlight in my face."

"You walked two miles," Dr. Lecter told him.

"Fuck," Will cursed softly. He lifted up his foot and examined the bottom, noting the scratches and filth caked to it.

“Did you see the ghost tonight?” Dr. Lecter took out a glass bottle of medication and loaded it into a syringe.

Will’s eyes widened at the thought of an injection, but he trusted Dr. Lecter’s expertise. “Uhm…”

Dr. Lecter squirted some of the medicine out of the end of the syringe, then looked at him. “Did you see the old man?”

“Yes,” Will admitted. “In… the TV. Like he was part of the movie I was watching.”

“This is a steroid. It should reduce any inflammation your body is currently experiencing.” Dr. Lecter wrapped a rubber tube around Will’s arm and called up the vein, and injected him. Then he came up with a couple of different white pills and handed them over. Will took them with his bedside glass of water. “Those will help you with the aches and chills and assist you with restful sleep.”

“Do you know what it is?” Will asked. “What’s wrong with me, I mean? Do I have mono or something?”

“I would need a blood test and possibly a scan to make a diagnosis. Have you been keeping track of your episodes?”

“Yeah, the notes are here.” Will gestured to the small notebook next to his water glass.

Dr. Lecter flipped it open and read through Will’s cramped handwriting. “You lost time? Woke up behind the wheel of your car?”

Will nodded.

Dr. Lecter regarded him with glimmering eyes and a downturned mouth. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to be a burden.”

“And now you’re much worse off,” Dr. Lecter scolded him.

“I didn’t want to be your patient,” Will spat back. It sounded so hurt and angry that he surprised himself. “I-I just, uh…” he tried again, softly, “... wanted to be *me* . Not something damaged.”

“Will,” Dr. Lecter said, shaking his head and offering a tender, forgiving smile. “You aren’t damaged. But you may be seriously ill, and as your friend – who just happens to be a doctor – I’m concerned.” He opened the notebook to the next blank page and handed Will a pen. “I want you to draw a clock for me.”

Will took the pad and pen. “A clock?”

“Yes.”

“What kind?” He wasn’t much of an artist. “Steeple? O-or the, uhm, the Atmos?”

“Any clock.”

“Grandfather, wall-hanging–”

Hannibal closed his eyes for a moment as if summoning his patience. Will shut his mouth. “Just a clock face. Circle, with the numbers. Make the time…” he checked his Rolex, “12:50.”

“Why?”

“Please, Will.”

Will sighed, irritation bleeding into the sound despite his previous guilt at speaking sharply. “Okay…” He drew a circle, labeled the numbers one through twelve, and set the hands as needed to create the correct time. He handed Dr. Lecter back the pen and notebook. “Are you gonna tell me what that’s all about?”
“It’s a cognition test.” Dr. Lecter noted the date on the drawing and put Will’s notebook back. Then he got out of the chair and went to the bathroom, coming back with a wet washcloth. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he lifted up one of Will’s feet and started wiping it clear of road dirt.

“You don’t have to do that,” Will blurted.

“I need to make sure you didn’t step on any nails or glass.” Dr. Lecter got up again and rinsed the rag, wetting it again and returning to his work. “You were lucky,” he said when he’d finished.

“Thanks.” Will’s body felt heavy and relaxed. The pills must be kicking in. Dr. Lecter took the dirty cloths to the hamper in the bathroom and then returned, sitting at his bedside again instead of the chair. Will was struck dumb by the intimacy of it. “Thanks for coming. I-I didn’t know… who else to call…”

“Never hesitate to rely on me for assistance.”

“Thanks, Dr. Lecter.”

“Will.” Dr. Lecter leaned in, resting a hand on Will’s shoulder where it curved into his neck, two fingers on flesh and two against cotton. “I’ve asked you before to call me Hannibal.”

Will nodded with a dreamy little smile. “Okay, all right.”

Hannibal was leaning in for… something. Will’s stupefied brain prevented him from movement or speech, caught between reactions. Hannibal’s hand was still on his shoulder. His face moved past Will’s and inhaled the air just below his ear. Will could clearly hear the intake of breath.

“Did you just *smell* me?” he asked with sleepy incredulousness, the medication clawing at him for slumber.

“I’m so glad you stopped wearing that aftershave.” Hannibal backed up a few inches to look at him.

“ ‘Course I did. You complained about it enough,” Will chuckled.

They were so close together. Will’s slow thoughts strung together like beads onto a necklace, one at a time. The hand on his shoulder had the weight of security, the skin warm and soft. *Why would you smell someone unless you…*

Hannibal’s other hand was resting on the edge of the mattress. Will settled his palm on top and found himself moving his thumb in a physically tiny but enormously significant caress. Was it the drugs or the illness or the late hour or was this… a moment?

The hand on his neck and shoulder re-positioned itself on the side of his face and Will’s sedated heart still found a way to crank into overdrive as a trembling breath passed between his lips. He had a sense of emotional deja vu, his heart suddenly inhabited by the trepidation he’d felt moments before handing Jack Crawford his letter of resignation. And yet, he’d extended his hand and passed the paper to his boss. When the letter left his fingers, he’d felt an almost unbearable lightness and a honed-sharp joy. And if he did this thing now… would that same sublime moment occur?

Will leaned in and pressed his lips against Hannibal’s. Just for a second, the longest second of his life. He felt a kind of electrical charge in the air between their mouths as they parted, as if there was still a source of power radiating between them, an invisible electromagnetic field, burdened and heavy with lightning.

He was afraid to look at Hannibal and gauge his reaction, but forced their gazes to connect. Hannibal’s eyes were wet and shining, lips slightly parted.

… cries at sad songs…

Now Hannibal angled in and kissed him for a longer beat before pulling away with an audible sound. His hand found its way into Will’s hair, stroking the tangled mess with adoring fingers. “Will,” he said softly, just to say it, it seemed, his name another caress that tingled along his nerves, making his breath catch.

Buster whined.

Hannibal’s hand fell away from the back of Will’s neck and he straightened, slowly sliding his other out from beneath Will’s grip. “I’ll let them outside,” he said, and the little quiver in his voice did not pass Will’s ears without notice. “Lie down and close your eyes.”

Will felt himself sink back on his pillow. Hannibal lifted Granny G’s afghan from the back of a chair near the window and draped it over him. “What if I sleepwalk again?” Will murmured, turning on his side to watch Hannibal put on his jacket, motioning to the dogs who obeyed instantly, scrabbling up from their beds by the dead hearth and gathering by the door.

“I’ll be here,” Hannibal promised, bending over to pet Winston. He pushed open the screen door and let the dogs out, stepping onto Will’s front porch to watch over them.

Will rolled onto his back and closed his eyes, thinking there was no way in hell he was going to be able to fall asleep. And then there was nothing but the velvet black behind his eyes.

"...The Hours of Wisdom"

Chapter Summary

Hannibal oversees Will's encephalitis treatment.

Chapter 7: "...The Hours of Wisdom."

In the days, weeks, and eventually months that followed, Will felt that same electric energy between Hannibal and him, felt it all the time. It was stronger when they were together, of course, but even when they were apart he could feel it stretched taut over the miles that separated them, a power line, a live wire unencumbered by insulation or encasement.

Hannibal took Will to the hospital the next day and had him admitted. He was scanned, his blood drawn, poked, prodded, tested, and questioned. It would have been a far more laborious process if Hannibal hadn't been there to do most of the talking and give his preliminary diagnosis – autoimmune encephalitis. In fact, he was there so often and was so downright bossy about Will's treatment and needs that the nurses and even Dr. Sutcliffe assumed that they were long-term romantic partners of some kind. Neither Will nor Hannibal did anything to dissuade anyone of their incorrect assumption. Will hadn't expected the thrill of triumph in his gut when Dr. Sutcliffe's disappointment was visible on his face for a few moments when he appeared to learn that Hannibal wasn't single.

Somewhat not single. The assumption of their entanglement wasn't entirely untrue. Every time he left, Hannibal kissed Will, lightly on the forehead or gently on the lips, and greeted him the same way. And he took care of everything – boarded the dogs at the finest kennel in the area, where the caretakers texted Will pictures of his pack several times a day with individual dog updates. He paid the utilities on the Wolf Trap house while Will was in the hospital, picked up Will's new glasses from the optometrist's office, and hired a young lady who lived down the road to mow the lawn. These actions, even more than the kisses, told Will everything. Hannibal was in love with him.

Will's treatments were intense and left him feeling like shit most of the time. He was on steroids that made him swell and caused his anxiety to spike. Once the inflammation was down to an acceptable level, Sutcliffe put him on immune system suppressants that were often given to patients who had had liver transplants.

"Look at this," he said one day when Hannibal returned. "Do you see this?" He held up his arm to the faint sunlight that came in through his hospital room window. "Look how long my arm hair is."

Hannibal picked up his wrist and examined it, running his cool touch over Will's forearm. "It's certainly much longer than I remember."

“But it’s weird – it’s so soft.”

Hannibal stroked up and down his arm several times. “You’re right. Like goose down.” He leaned forward and ran his hands through Will’s curls. “And your hair is thicker.”

“Same with my facial hair.” He’d been growing it out in the hospital, and had the best beard going he’d ever produced. Hannibal touched this as well, noting its delicate texture.

“If I’m not mistaken, approximately one percent of patients on this particular brand of immunosuppressive therapy have increased hair growth as a side effect.” Hannibal smiled down at him, tilting his head. “You look very handsome, Will.”

Will scoffed. “I look like I’ve been living in the woods.”

Hannibal ran his hand through Will’s hair again, more deliberately this time, then sat on the edge of his bed. Will rested a hand on his bent knee and gazed up at him with a tired smile. “Mmm,” he murmured. “Feels good.”

Encouraged, Hannibal kept at it, stroking Will’s thickened hair away from his forehead, running the backs of his knuckles along his jawline. “You are, you know.”

“What?”

“Lovely.”

“Stop.”

“I won’t.” Hannibal took Will’s hand in both of his own and held it. Kissed him.

Will only saw the ghost of the old man one more time. It was towards the end of the treatment. Will knew he was dreaming, and the hallucination – because that must have been what it was – didn’t have the frantic, fevered edge it once did. The old man stood at the side of his hospital bed, holding the steeple clock like a child again. His mouth didn’t move, but Will knew he was speaking.

You know what he is. If you open him up to see how he works there won’t be a person under there. If you hadn’t kissed him, he would have wound you up to watch you go. But now you know.

One day we all stop ticking. At the end you wonder, where did the time go? It went. One chime at a time. You have to decide if you can love the one who tears out gears and stops the hands in sounders of three.

When Will woke up, he knew what he had to do.

Safe and Sound, Safe and Sound

Chapter Summary

I've got this feeling that there's something that I missed
(I could do most anything to you)
Don't you breathe, don't you breathe
(I could do most anything to you)
Something happened that I never understood
(I could do most anything to you)
You can't leave, you can't leave
Every second dripping off my finger tips
(I could do most anything to you)
Wage your war, wage your war
(I could do most anything to you)
Another soldier says he's not afraid to die
(I could do most anything to you)
I am scared, I'm so scared
In slow motion the blast is beautiful
(I could do most anything to you)
Doors slam shut, doors slam shut
(I could do most anything to you)
A clock is ticking but it's hidden far away
(I could do most anything to you)
Safe and sound, safe and sound...

Snow Patrol "Somewhere, a Clock is Ticking..."

Chapter 8: Safe and Sound, Safe and Sound

Hannibal had arranged for the dogs to be home before Will was released from the hospital so they'd be there to greet him. That night, they ate a simple dinner, though Hannibal attempted to make it more complicated, as was his wont. "Silkie chicken in a broth," he said, ladling stew into Will's bowl. "The silkie chicken is a black-boned bird, prized in China for its medicinal values since the 7th century. I've simmered it for hours with wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates, and star anise."

Will sat back in his chair, rubbing his chin with a smile that quickly became a grin, shaking his head.

"Yes?" Hannibal said, sitting down across from him at Will's humble table with a bowl of his own, a loaf of homemade bread and fresh butter between them.

“You made me chicken soup.”

“Yes.”

“In the most Hannibal way possible.” Will dipped his spoon in and sipped the hot broth. “But damn, that hits the spot.”

“Tired of hospital food?”

“It wasn’t awful, but this is just… *so* much better.”

After eating, Hannibal insisted on clearing up, leaving Will to rest. Will took the dogs out instead. He was tired of being in bed. Well, he was tired of being in bed *alone* .

After a while, Hannibal joined him on the porch, watching the dogs play in the yard. “How are you feeling?”

“Perfect. Good as new. Though I’m, ah… gonna take a non-hospital shower real quick.” He paused. “Are you… staying?”

“I think it’s prudent. To be sure, beyond a doubt, that you’ve recovered.”

“Good.” The relief he felt was palpable.

Will showered and washed with much more than his usual care. He hadn’t shaved in a long time, and had to clipper down the wild hair on his neck – and other places – before getting after it with a razor. He kept the beard, though, giving it the tiniest trim. It was still soft and glossy. Hannibal had told him the excess hair from the medication would fall out eventually. Might as well enjoy it while it lasted. Time ticking by, everything ephemeral.

When he came back to the living room, Hannibal was in a chair, reading. Pretending to read, Will thought. There was that crackle of connection between them again, sharp and enigmatic. This time, his body was stronger, and his brain wasn’t on fire. This allowed Will to feel the current of Hannibal’s presence far more acutely. Conjoined. He caught Hannibal looking at him over the top of the book, just for a moment, taking him in as he paused next to the bed in his tee shirt and boxers.

“You don’t have to sleep upstairs,” Will said quietly, rubbing his shoulder with the opposite hand, a nervous gesture. “I know that futon’s terrible.”

“Is this a test?” Hannibal asked, though the edge of his mouth twitched upward.

Will sighed, shaking his head and resting his hands on his hips. “All right. Yeah, well… fine, let’s just be direct.”

“I know you appreciate it when I’m direct with you.” Hannibal stood up, putting the book down on the chair’s seat.

“I want you to sleep downstairs with me,” Will stated.

“I would love to,” was the reply. Then, “are you tired now?”

“Almost.” Will sat down on the bed and scooted over closer to the wall, making room. He watched, curled up on his side, as Hannibal slowly unbuttoned his shirt, draping it carefully over the back of the chair, stepping out of his shoes and, at last, unbuttoning his pants and sliding them off, leaving him in a tight, dark undergarment. Will drank up the sight of his body like nourishment. Solid and strong in a way that felt like the ultimate comfort even before they touched.

Hannibal sank down next to him on the bed with slow, careful movements. And now they touched, hands hesitant at first. Will let himself run his fingers through Hannibal’s chest hair and around his back, hooking a leg over his. Hannibal pulled him close, stretching an arm out for Will to rest his head on.

“Still so soft.” The backs of Hannibal’s knuckles stroked Will’s beard.

“I hope it stays,” Will said.

Kissing now, slow, lingering couplings of lips and eventually tongue, Hannibal’s hand stroking up and down the back of his neck, teasing the curls at his nape before dragging his fingertips along his jaw, through the unnaturally silken beard. Will caressed the smooth skin of Hannibal’s ribs and back, drawing in closer. “Do you know what you want, Will?” Hannibal’s question was breathy, attempting serenity as if Will couldn’t sense his neediness.

“Yeah, I do.” Will slid his hand down around Hannibal’s rounded, muscled ass and cupped it gently, then squeezed it in a grope that made his intentions very clear. Hannibal’s response was to slip his hand between Will’s thighs and draw it up, stroking him through the barrier of cloth, eliciting a staggered moan of desire.

“Life’s too short,” Hannibal reasoned, his words brushing over Will’s open mouth as he moaned again at the continued caress, “not to take what you want.”

“You’re right. It is.” Will eased up onto his knees and knelt over Hannibal, relishing the feeling of his large warm hands cherishing his back and thighs. “Can I take it, then?”

“By all means.”

Will hooked his fingers into Hannibal’s underwear and peeled them off. Hannibal was already half-hard and his cock was… *unnecessarily* gorgeous, neatly groomed and well-proportioned. He’d never thought about an erection as aesthetically beautiful, but then again, he’d never seen one attached to someone he loved, body and soul. He eased Hannibal into his mouth one handed with slow, reverent movements. The taste was the same – enhanced and perfected because it was Hannibal’s.

The sudden sweet intake of breath and appreciative sigh threw Will’s own desire into overdrive. He hadn’t given a lot of head before this, but he called upon every last fiber of skill he had, trying to weave them into a tapestry of pleasure that could accurately impart how much he loved this man.

Not man. *Creature* under the person suit, more aptly. But the love was there regardless. Because of, not in spite of.

Will paused his work when he felt Hannibal's thighs tensing. "I want this." He slid his first two fingers along Hannibal's cleft, wet with moisture from Will's tongue, and massaged the pucker of his hole.

"Yes, Will." The words were uttered so humbly, as if what Will wanted was somehow selfless.

Will opened his bedside drawer for the bottle of uninteresting lube he'd only used on himself until this moment. Squeezing some into his palm, he leaned in for a kiss, sighing into Hannibal's mouth as the doctor's agile hand found his nipple and administered a sensual torture even as Will worked him open, stroking into him with one finger, then two, then three. Hannibal bit his lip and arched his back now, arms falling back on the bed as if unable to multitask, his leaking cock resting on the gentle protuberance of his belly. Will leaned in to kiss the underside of the shaft as he kept his fingers moving in and out, and licked a long stripe from the base to the tip, savoring the taste again.

"Will…"

It was time. Will removed his fingers and slicked his cock and Hannibal's crevice with more lube. He turned Hannibal on his side; his body was both tensed with the need for released pleasure, and pliable to Will's guidance. He lay behind in spoon position, supporting himself on one elbow. Hannibal lifted his leg and Will pressed his cock against the ring of muscle until the head went in and was clenched inside. Will gasped, trying not to thrust. Gradually, he pressed in until he was fully enveloped in the hottest, tightest place his cock had ever been. Hannibal lowered his leg with a shuddering breath and murmured his name as Will moved in tight against him, clutching his chest as he began to thrust. Once the rhythm was established, he moved down to grasp Hannibal's cock with his slicked hand and pleasure him simultaneously.

He was sweating, moaning, kissing Hannibal's hair and his neck and the back of his shoulder. "You feel… so good, oh God…"

"Will," Hannibal gasped in response. "It's beautiful."

It'd been a long time since any kind of sexual activity, even masturbation, since Will had been in the hospital. He tried to hold on, but all of the emotions and pent-up physicality got the better of him. Moments from spilling, he increased his grip on Hannibal's cock, and they came together with a singular sensual fury.

"I love you," Will said. He had his arms around Hannibal from behind and they were still joined; he could feel his warm seed slipping out of Hannibal's ass and onto his thigh. "All of you, Hannibal. Do you understand me?"

"All of me?" He couldn't see Hannibal's face, but there was a little catch in his voice.

"All of you," Will confirmed again. "Above and below. Seen and hidden."

“Do you think you can?” Hannibal turned in his arms after Will’s hardness receded and he slipped free. He ran his hand through Will’s hair, pushing it behind his ear. “Truly?”

“I already do. And there’s no going back.” He smiled. “Life’s, ah, too short not to use the good plates, right?”

“The feast is life,” Hannibal said, drawing him in for a kiss. “Eat it and live.”

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick…

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